

**TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE COMMERCE, SCIENCE
AND TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE
Hearing on "Marketing Violence to Children"
presented by
DAPHNE WHITE, Executive Director
The Lion & Lamb Project
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My name is Daphne White, and I am the Executive Director of The Lion & Lamb Project, a national grassroots parents' initiative founded in 1995 with the aim of putting a stop to the merchandising of violence to children. I have 20 years of experience as a journalist writing about issues of children, families and education. As a mother I was concerned about the so-called "entertainment" violence that confronted my young son everywhere we went. So, putting together my professional expertise and my worry as a mother, I founded The Lion & Lamb Project four years ago.

And it is in this capacity as both mother and professional that I appear today. As such, I am speaking for the millions of mothers, fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts, uncles, teachers, day care workers, and other concerned adults who care about children.

It has suddenly become common to blame *parents* for what has happened to some of America's children. Well, let me say that as a parent and as the director of a national parenting organization, I agree that parents need to be held responsible for their children. We *do* need more parental responsibility, we need parents to become the authorities in their children's lives, to teach children their own values of nonviolence, to say "no" when "no" is the appropriate thing to say, and to make the "no" stick.

In a culture where violence is so glorified, parents need to give their children a clear message that violence is not acceptable. Violence is *NOT* child's play. Doing this requires constant vigilance on the part of parents -- we must monitor the television our children watch, the movies and videos they see, the toys they play with, and the video games and internet games they engage in.

But in a culture where one *billion* dollars a year is spent by industry to advertise directly to children -- including the advertising of "entertainment" products -- parents have an uphill battle every day to teach their own values to their children.

The "entertainment" industry has given us "virtual violence" every where we go: violent video games in pizza parlors and movie theater lobbies; previews for R-rated movies at G-rated children's matinees; action figures marketed to young children based on ultra-violent adult-rated video games; the list goes on and on.

For far too long, the "entertainment" industry has been hiding behind a virtual fig leaf, saying "We just put our products out in the marketplace. It's up to parents to say 'no.'"

The flood of violence engulfing children's lives is impossible for parents to stop on their own. Industry has to take responsibility too.

We can no longer deny that super-saturating children's lives with a constant barrage of glorified violence has an effect on developing minds. Three comprehensive national studies, spanning a period of more than 25 years, have demonstrated that viewing violence increases violent behavior. These comprehensive studies include:

- the Surgeon General's Commission in 1972
- The National Institute of Mental Health in 1982
- the American Psychological Association in 1992.

This last report concluded that “*children's exposure to violence in the mass media, particularly at young ages, can have harmful lifelong consequences.*”

The entertainment industry is behaving with the same reckless disregard for the facts that the tobacco industry showed for so many years. Congress has taken action to protect young children from the marketing efforts of the tobacco and alcohol industries. The similarities are profound, not just in the marketing efforts, but also in the effects of the advertising on children's health. For years, the cigarette companies denied the link between cigarette smoking and lung cancer.

Now, we know that not every person who smokes will get lung cancer, but a certain percentage of people will undeniably contract the disease. Similarly not every child who watches 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on television before graduating elementary schools (and those figures are true for the average child, one who watches an average of four hours of television a day) is going to grow up to perform violent acts. But as Dr. Huesmann will tell you, a 30-year longitudinal study shows that there is a direct correlation between viewing violent media and aggressive behavior. This research has been replicated over a period of 30 years with more than 250,000 children.

Currently, parents are not operating on a level playing field in their attempts to limit children's access to violent videos, toys, television, movies, song lyrics, and other forms of "entertainment" marketed to children. While much money is spent advertising violent products, relatively little is spent promoting traditional, wholesome, creative and child-friendly toys and products. There are lots of wonderful products out there -- Lion & Lamb recommends 20 of them each year in our Top Twenty list -- but they are often from smaller toy companies who do not have the multi-million dollar advertising budgets of giants Hasbro and Mattel.

Children in this country have slowly been transformed into consumers, and they are consuming products that their parents know little -- if anything -- about.

In a recent parent poll, it was revealed that 95 percent of parents have never heard of an ultra-

violent, adult video game called Duke Nukem, yet 80 percent of their junior high-school children have heard of this video. There is a vast information gap in this country.

Other toys marketed to young children today include:

- **Talking Street Force** -- this is a fierce-looking action figure about a foot high, marked "for ages five and up." "Try me!" says the box, "Hear commands." When the red button on the soldier's belt is pushed, here is what he threatens: "Don't move, hot shot!" immediately followed by sounds of machine gun fire. Push the button again, and he says, "Don't even try it!" More gunfire.
- **Small Soldiers** are characters based on a movie, released by DreamWorks at just about the same time they released *Private Ryan*. Many critics called *Private Ryan* one of the best anti-war movies ever made, because it portrayed the real horrors of war. The violence in this adult movie was not "gratuitous."

Small Soldiers, on the other hand, presents a totally different picture of violence to young children. The action figures who are the so-called villains in this movie have a motto, which they gleefully repeat at every turn: "Show no mercy." These Small Soldiers go through the movie virtually destroying an idyllic small American town -- their violent and destructive rampage through the neighborhood at the end of the movie is portrayed as a highly amusing episode. In another scene which should frighten many parents, the Small Soldiers turn an ordinary garage into a war launching zone, with the soldiers gleefully transforming ordinary household products and garden tools into weapons of destruction.

This movie was actually rated T-13, intended for children 13 and above. However, an entire line of toys was released along with this movie -- a common practice in today's entertainment world, where the tie-ins often produce more money than the actual film. The toys were rated as "safe for children four and up." In other words, G-rated toys were marketed along with a T-13 movie. A number of years ago, *Starship Troopers* -- an R-rated movie -- also came out with a line of children's toys.

To exacerbate children's confusion about real and make-believe, many of these toys came with sound effects, including the voices of Tommy Lee Jones and the other actors in the movie. Copy included the motto, "Show no mercy." The Small Soldiers toys, according to the packaging, were "created to be relentless war machines" who "do not understand the meaning of the word quit -- or mercy." According to the box description, "destruction, carnage, havoc -- it's all in a day's work for the Commando Elite." Brick Bazooka, one of the characters in this line, "shoots first and asks questions later."

This line of toys was produced by Hasbro, the country's second-largest toy company, whose motto is, "Making the World Smile."

- **Laser Challenge V2**, by Toymax, has a "rapid fire that gives you 25 continuous blasts for extreme attacks," according to the box. The silent mode "allows sneak attacks without letting your opponent know where the blasts come from." The Ultrawide Laser Blaster "fires a beam up to 50 feet wide, allowing you to blast an entire team of opponents with one shot." The new ELS Game System helps children keep better score by electronically recording their "shots" and "hits."

Attached is The Lion & Lamb Project's "Dirty Dozen" list, a list of toys and video games we release each year around the holiday shopping season. This was our 1998 list of toys to avoid, released last November. It describes some of the wording used on the actual toy packages to specifically merchandise violence to children.

Videos marketed to children and youth today include:

- **Worms 2** by Micro Prose, a cartoon-style computer game where "cute" and "pink" earthworm creatures "wreak havoc on their rivals in an addictive game of revenge and mean-minded cruelty," according to the package. This game is marketed to children six and up, urging them to "leave slimy trails on the corpses of your enemies" and to "remember, world domination is just a cluster bomb away!" This, is a game rated as "appropriate" for children ages six and up.
- **Urban Assault** by Microsoft, a computer game that is "optimized for destruction," where children must destroy an urban environment in order to "repel the hordes of alien invaders and renegade human forces that have descended upon the planet's corpse." Again, this material is rated as appropriate for children ages six and up.

While we should talk about parental responsibility, we also must talk about industry responsibility.

Video games now have a rating system, developed by industry under pressure from Congress. I want to thank Senator Joseph Lieberman and Senator Herb Kohl for their hard work in the creation of the ratings body, called the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB).

While I applaud the efforts of this industry group let me say that I find the rating system very inconsistent, especially in the way they rate toys for young children and teens. I see the current ratings system as a first step, but we need to go further.

All children want to appear and act older than they are -- each age group aspires to the behaviors and attitudes of the next-older group. Business and industry are even more aware of this trend

than parents are. Therefore, if a game is rated "T-13" (teen) or "M" (mature), manufacturers are banking on the fact that the age label alone will make that product instantly more appealing to children ages eight and up. Pre-teens aspire to be like teens, and teens aspire to be like adults. In an article I recently wrote for Lion & Lamb's newsletter, I quoted a Toys R Us executive who marveled at how quickly children are progressing from *Teletubbies* to *Barney* to *Power Rangers* - and, I might add, to *Duke Nukem*.

I call on industry to be responsible in how they market videos to young children. Right now, the toy industry is behaving no better than the tobacco industry before Attorney Generals from around the states forced settlements in lawsuits.

I am not objecting to the existence of "M"-rated games, or suggesting banning or censoring them in any way. I am also not suggesting that we limit the availability of these games for adults. However, I do not want these videos marketed to children and youth any more than I want cigarettes and other tobacco products marketed to my son.

Duke Nukem and *Mortal Kombat* are video games rated "M." So, why market action figures to children ages eight and up based on video games intended for adults?

The answer comes directly from my interview with an executive for Tiger Electronics, which markets games for children based on adult-rated videos. At this year's International Toy Fair, he assured me that the content and "game objective" of these hand-held children's games is exactly the same as the adult version. He went further and said that since parents would never buy an "M"-rated game for their children, Tiger will make sure these games will be rated "T-13" by the ratings board based on a visual technicality. There will be no difference in content between the children's game and the adult-rated video: the only difference is that the screen size is smaller on the hand-held game, and the visuals are black and white instead of color.

By introducing ever-younger children to ever-more violent products, the toy and video game industries are shamelessly marketing these toys to young children. How long will the average child be satisfied with the T-13 hand-held game before wanting to play the "real" version on a full-size, color graphic video screen? What is the point of creating a Duke Nukem action figure, if not to introduce and familiarize very young children with this adult video game character?

In the last two weeks, especially, since Littleton, we have been hearing a lot about punishing the parents. But why should only parents be held responsible? Why should industry be allowed to spend millions and millions of dollars advertising hyper-violent -- unimaginably violent -- products specifically to young children?

It is time to level the playing field. If you are serious about stopping the merchandising of violence

to children, I implore you to appoint a blue-ribbon, non-industry-dominated commission to study the ways that violence is being marketed and cross-marketed to young children, and to find ways of protecting children from this cultural poison.

This is no different from the work you have done on behalf of children in regulating the tobacco industry, and it is no different than the federal regulations and laws prohibiting advertisement for alcohol. Tobacco and alcohol are still legal in this country, they are still available to adults. However, we have drawn the line at marketing this adult fare to children.

I also ask that Congress appropriate money for a National Parents' Clearinghouse on Children and Entertainment Violence. If we want parents to take more responsibility, we have to provide them with information. The Lion & Lamb Project, for example, has produced an award-winning resource called The Parent Action Kit. This Kit has information that every parent needs about the ways that children learn violence, ways that parents can teach their own values to their children; how to select age-appropriate and non-violent toys; and how to teach your children anger management and conflict resolution skills.

We are a nonprofit grassroots group, and we can't afford to make this Parent Action Kit available for free to every parent in this country. A National Parents' Clearinghouse on Children and Entertainment Violence, funded by Congress, could provide material in the same way the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information provides access to invaluable resources to parents, educators, and advocates.

In addition to the Clearinghouse -- which will offer information to parents -- this country should also undertake a massive parenting outreach and education campaign about the ways that children learn violence. This campaign should be based on the best available research, and should be conducted in collaboration with groups such as The Lion & Lamb Project, the American Psychological Association, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and other groups. APA and NAEYC are in the midst of a campaign to fund just such an Ad Council campaign, and I call upon government and industry today to step up with the funds to make this public education campaign possible, so we can get this vital information into the hands of parents. The basic message of this public education campaign is simple: *Violence is not Child's Play*.

You need a license in this country to drive a car, but most parents get no training whatsoever in being a parent. Yet parenting is the most important job any of us will ever have. If we want parents to be more responsible, we need to give them the tools they need.

The Lion & Lamb Project has developed a training program to help inform parents of the fact that violence is a learned behavior; that parents have a crucial role in teaching anger management and conflict resolution skills to their own children; the fact that television and other media violence

desensitizes children to violence; and that classic, traditional toys are the best things for young children to use for playing out their own (and not adults') fantasy lives.

Other groups have effective parenting programs as well. Congress can set aside funding to pilot some of these programs nationwide, evaluate them, and then fund some of these parenting programs in communities all over this country.

Imagine if just one fraction of the one billion dollars now used to market products to children were spent on educating parents about the video rating system, or age-appropriate toys, or ways to listen to children and help them solve the conflicts and issues in their lives.

As with tobacco and alcohol, government needs to assume its responsibility to neutralize the pervasive and intrusive violent messages children confront every day. Government alone, however, cannot take the place of parents who can begin to take these three beginning steps in their own homes:

1. Be very clear with your children that violence is totally unacceptable. Violence is not child's play, and neither is it acceptable at home, in school, on the playground, anywhere. Be very *consistent* -- and very *insistent* -- if you want your children to believe you. Children are very good at reading their parents inconsistencies, so believe what you say.
2. Don't give your children mixed messages by saying violence is bad one day, and exposing them to violent toys, games and entertainment the next day.
3. Talk to your children about nonviolence and how to regularly solve conflicts nonviolently. Drug research shows that children whose parents talk to them consistently about drug abuse tend to abuse drugs less. The same holds true for children whose parents teach them, on a consistent basis, how to solve problems without using physical force. It is not enough to have a once-a-year discussion with the theme, "violence is bad." This lesson needs to be reinforced every day. Children also need to learn constructive ways to handle their feelings, their frustration, their anger and their conflicts. Many parents did not have an opportunity to learn these skills themselves as they were growing up -- parents may need help in learning how to teach these skills to their children.

Since the Littleton shooting, many commentators have insisted that media violence is not really the reason those children killed. Some say that the availability of guns is not really the reason children kill. Others say that music and video games are not really the reason for the shocking sight of children turning lethal mega-weapons on other children.

In reality, none of us will ever know what led those two youths to murder their schoolmates in

cold blood. There were many reasons that those suburban boys became killers, and those reasons may be the same or different than the reasons that drove boys to kill in Jonesboro or Paducah or Pearl.

However, just because there are many reasons does not give us the luxury of doing NOTHING. If each sector of society points the finger at the other we will get nowhere. The time has come to work together, to admit that as adults, as government, as schools, as industry, we are failing children in MANY ways, and we need to open our eyes, and walk together.